54 | The First Recorded Cinderella Story

THE CINDERELLA STORY is one of the world's best-loved and most widely distributed fairy tales. Occurring in many different variants, this tale of the "Ash Maiden"—who experiences glory and riches as a result of losing her slipper—is familiar to children (and adults) around the globe. Since the most widely known version of the story is European, it will undoubtedly come as a surprise to learn that the earliest exemplar of the tale is to be found in a Tang collection of exotica. Although some scholars have jumped to the conclusion that the Cinderella story itself must therefore have originated in China, this is almost certainly not the case.

A careful and close reading of the Chinese tale reveals unmistakable traces of its immediate origins in Southeast Asia, with hints that its ultimate roots lie to the west. Furthermore, this earliest "Chinese" Cinderella story (and there are many later variants within China as well) manifestly derived from fiercely independent non-Sinitic peoples. These particular non-Sinitic peoples (and we must remember that still today China has many non-Sinitic groups scattered throughout its length and breadth) lived in the far southern reaches of what is now China. At the time when the story was first written down, however, the region was only nominally and tangentially under Chinese political and military control. Culturally and socially, this part of the empire was almost completely un-Chinese.

In reading this Cinderella story, these facts should be kept clearly in mind. Indeed, the Chinese scholar who recorded the story is at pains to make explicit its non-Sinitic derivation. Duan Chengshi (ca. 800–863) was a bibliophile, word-fancier, and collector of curiosities who spent most of his life living in the Yangtze River Valley region, from the upper reaches in Sichuan to the cosmopolitan city of Yangzhou on its lower reaches. His father was the great minister Duan Wenchang (772–835), who had earned a reputation for skillfulness in governing the aboriginal peoples of the south. The elder Duan obtained a position for his son as collator of texts in the royal library. Later, as a private scholar, Duan Chengshi worked in his own well-stocked library at home. Duan had a particular penchant for all things arcane, strange, and alien. He was conversant with Buddhist literature, and especially sought out foreigners as his informants. For example, he states that he learned some of his tales from "Romans" (who may actually have been Anatolians or Syrians) and others from Indians. So devoted was Duan to the accurate description of the non-Sinitic that he even provides much valuable linguistic data in the tales that he recorded. Among the diverse topics that he wrote on were imported incenses and perfumes plus their names in the languages of the countries whence they came, medicinal herbs from abroad, falconry (introduced to China by steppe peoples), and tattooing (the history and practice of which he describes in extraordinary detail).

Duan Chengshi's aspirations in his compulsive gathering of the odd and the out-of-the-way may be gleaned from the title of the omnibus in which he gathered his records, reports, essays, and tales. That is the *Youyang zazu,* where *zazu* means something like "smorgasbord" or "miscellany" and *Youyang* is a place name referring to a mountain in Hunan (south-central China). According to legend, certain scholars who were fleeing from the "burning of the books" carried out by the First Emperor of the Qin dynasty (221–207 B.C.E.) sought refuge in this place. Upon arrival, they deposited the texts they brought with them in a cave on the mountain. These writings (which pre-

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sumably survived nowhere else) were later discovered by people who had wandered into the cave. Because of this legend, the name Youyang came to signify rare and old books from from far away. Thus the entire title signifies roughly "miscellaneous morsels of lost lore." The Cinderella story recorded by Duan Chengshi fits comfortably under that rubric.

For a fuller understanding of how the Cinderella story made its way from points west to Southeast Asia, thence to the far south of the Tang imperium, and thence to central China where it was finally written down, an intensive investigation of trading patterns in the Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal, and South China Sea is necessary. During the Tang period, there was a vibrant market economy that, judging from the products which were available and the large numbers of foreigners resident in most major cities, had distinct international dimensions. Under such conditions of flourishing long-distance trade, the transmission of the Cinderella story to the southern hinterlands of the Tang empire from India and beyond becomes much easier to comprehend.

Although an enormous amount of excellent research has been done on the various types and complicated distribution of the Cinderella story, the "Chinese" version presented here—because it is the earliest extant written version to be discovered anywhere—is important for understanding the development of this famous fairy tale. Unfortunately, the "Chinese" story is poorly known outside of a small circle of Sinologists. Those intrepid folklorists who have endeavored to make sense of it in terms of the overall evolution of the Cinderella story worldwide have been hampered by inadequate, inaccurate translations and mistaken assumptions about its cultural specificity. To facilitate future research on this intriguing topic, the present rendition provides extensive Sinological annotations, historical background, and explanations of cultural customs and beliefs. This treatment is also intended to enhance the pleasure of the general reader in encountering this charming story.—VHM

A Chinese Cinderella Story

The southern people have passed down [the story] of a tribal leader[1] in pre–Qin-Han times[2] surnamed Wu[3] whom the aborigines called "Cave Wu." He married two wives, one of whom died, leaving behind a daughter named Yexian.[4] When Yexian was young, she was intelligent and good at working[5] gold, so her father loved her. Advanced in years, the father died, whereupon Yexian was abused by her stepmother, who often ordered her to gather firewood in dangerous (steep) places and draw water from the depths. It so happened that once she caught a fish a little over two inches long with a dark red dorsal fin and golden eyes [in her bucket], whereupon she put it in a bowl of water and raised it. Day by day it grew, causing her to change the bowl several times. It grew so big that no bowl could hold it; consequently she threw it into the pond out back. Whatever extra food the girl got hold of, she right away submerged it [in the pond] to feed the fish.

When the girl went to the pond, the fish would be sure to stick its head out of the water and pillow it on the bank, but the fish would not appear when anyone else approached. The stepmother came to know about the fish, yet every time she waited for it, she never saw the fish. So she deceived Yexian, saying, "Haven't you been working too hard? I've made a new jacket for you." Whereupon she exchanged [the new jacket] for Yexian's shabby clothing. After that the stepmother ordered Yexian to fetch water from a spring that was several miles away. Then the stepmother leisurely put on Yexian's clothing, and, with a sharp knife in her sleeve, she walked toward the pond and called the fish. Right away, the fish stuck out its head, thus the stepmother killed it with the knife. The fish had already grown to more than ten feet in length. The step-

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mother made a meal out of its flesh, which was twice as tasty as that of an average fish. She hid its bones beneath a dung heap.[6]

The next day, when Yexian went toward the pond, she didn't see the fish anymore, whereupon she cried in the wilderness. Suddenly, there was a person[7] with hair splayed across the shoulders and wearing coarse clothing who came down from the sky and consoled Yexian, saying, "Don't cry. It was your stepmother who killed your fish. Its bones are beneath the dung. When you go back, you can take the fish bones and hide them in your room. Whatever you need you have only to pray to the bones and your wish will be granted." Yexian followed the person's instructions and was provided with gold, pearls, clothing, and food as she desired.

With the advent of the community festival, the stepmother went [to take part in it], but ordered Yexian to guard the fruit trees in the courtyard. Yexian waited until her mother had gone quite far and then went [to the festival] herself. She wore a blouse woven of kingfisher feathers and golden[8] slippers. The daughter to whom the stepmother had given birth recognized Yexian and said to her mother, "That [girl] looks very much like my older sister." The stepmother was also suspicious. As soon as Yexian was aware [that they had noticed her], she hurriedly turned back, leaving behind one of her slippers, which was picked up by a member of the tribal community. When the mother returned, all she saw was Yexian sleeping in the courtyard with her arms wrapped around one of the fruit trees, so she thought nothing more of it.

The tribal community bordered on an ocean island,[9] and on the island was a kingdom named Tuohan.[10] Tuohan was militarily powerful and ruled over scores of [other] islands.[11] Its coastal shores were more than a thousand[12] miles in length. The member of the tribal community [who had found Yexian's slipper] subsequently sold it to [the kingdom of] Tuohan. When the ruler of Tuohan obtained the slipper he ordered [the women] who were in close attendance upon him to put it on, [but even for] those with small feet, the slipper would shrink an inch [when they tried to put it on]. Then he ordered all the women in the kingdom to try it on, but in the end it did not fit any of them.

The slipper was light as a feather and made no sound [even when someone wearing it] walked on stones. The king of Tuohan suspected that the man of the tribal community had obtained it through improper[14] means, so he had the man imprisoned, shackled, and interrogated with torture. [Yet, when all was said and done,[15]] it was not known where the slipper had come from. Then [the king had the man] cast out by the side of the road with the slipper, [with instructions to search] everywhere from house to house to match[16] it. If there was a woman who could wear [the slipper], she was to be arrested and the king informed.[17] [After the man had located the matching slipper, he told the king of Tuohan, who journeyed to the tribal community to see for himself.] The king marveled at it,[18] so he searched her room and discovered Yexian [there]. He commanded her to put on the slipper, and [, when it fit, he finally] believed.

Thereafter, wearing her blouse woven of kingfisher feathers and the [golden] slippers, Yexian made a [grand] entrance. Her form[19] was like that of a heavenly being.[20] Only then did she tell everything that had happened to the king, who returned to his kingdom transporting both the fish bones and Yexian with him.

The stepmother and her daughter were soon killed when they were struck by flying stones.[21] Lamenting them, the members of the tribal community buried [the stepmother and her daughter] in a stone pit, which they called "Tomb of the Repentant Women." The members of the tribal community treated [the tomb] as a matchmaking shrine, and, when they sought a wife,[22] it would be sure to comply.

Upon reaching his kingdom, the king of Tuohan made Yexian his primary wife. [During] the first year, the king was greedy and prayed to the fish bones for unlimited treasures. [After] a year

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had passed, [the bones] no longer responded. Then the king buried the fish bones at the seashore, depositing them in a hundred bushels of pearls and using gold for a boundary. When the conscripted soldiers rebelled, he was planning to disburse [the pearls and gold] to provide for the troops, but one night they were washed away by the tide.

[This story] was told by Li Shiyuan, who was formerly a servant of my[23] household.[24] Shiyuan was originally the member of a tribal community in Yongzhou,[25] and he could recall many strange tales from the south.

—VHM

Notes

Material in square brackets [X] indicates additions to the Chinese text necessary for full intelligibility in English. Material in parentheses (X) indicates minimal amplification or clarification.

1. Literally, "cave host/chief," the term "cave" being used by Chinese writers during the Tang period (618–906) to designate tribal communities of non-Sinitic peoples in the area of what is now south China.

2. That is, before the Qin (221–207 B.C.E.) and Western Han (206 B.C.E.–6 C.E.) dynasties.

3. Medieval pronunciation *ŋuo*.

4. Medieval pronunciation *i̯ɛpγăn*:.

5. The verb is uncertain, there being several textual variants: "panning [for]," "buckling/hooking," etc. The girl may have been proficient at spinning gold thread, a technique perfected by the Persians and other Middle Eastern peoples.

6. The author chooses an unusual word for dung heap, viz., *yuqi,* ancient Sinitic pronunciation **ɦi̯wət siər*. Since the meanings of the two graphs ("lush/dense/depressed/melancholy" and "perch") make no sense as a collocation, we may assume that the word is a transcription of some non-Sinitic term. The *yuqi* is a filthy place that would have included garbage, excrement, and most likely ashes. Since Yexian has to scrabble through the *yuqi* later in the story, the dung heap here is the functional equivalent of ashes in other Cinderella stories.

7. The gender of this person is ambiguous.

8. The slippers were probably embroidered with gold thread.

9. This is a bit of an exaggeration, since Nanning (see n. 25 below) is hundreds of miles from the nearest ocean, although—to someone from central or north-central China like Duan Chengshi—in Tang times the area to the southeast of Nanning would have been thought of as intimately involved in oceanic travel.

10. Middle Sinitic *d'aγan*. This is almost certainly meant to be a transcription of Dvāravati/Dvārapatī or Tavoy, Southeast Asian kingdoms that flourished during the Tang period and whose names were transcribed by Chinese in a nearly identical fashion, one which is very close to the transcription given here in our text. Both of these kingdoms were important transshipment points for long-distance trade between East and West. Dvāravati (flourished from the sixth through thirteenth centuries, with its peak in the ninth century) was especially vital in this regard and played a key role in the spread of Indian ideas and motifs to Southeast Asia (and beyond to China).

11. Perhaps a reference to the Mergui Archipelago, composed of some two hundred islands, which lies along the western edge of the Isthmus of Kra.

12. More literally, "several thousand *li*" (tricent = three hundred paces or approximately one-third of a mile [a thousand paces]).

13. Literally, "decrease."

14. Literally, *fei Dao* (not [in accord with the] Way), an expression that could signify a range of meanings from inappropriate to immoral to illegal.

15. All of the words in this set of brackets correspond to *jing* in the text, translated as "in the end" in the last sentence of the previous paragraph.

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16. The verb in the text is *bu* (capture, arrest), but this would seem to be an error for the homophonous and graphically similar word *bu* (supplement, complement, complete).

17. The text is clearly defective at this point, there being a gap between the finding of the matching slipper and the king's being told about it.

18. It is not entirely clear precisely what the king finds so marvelous—the fact that the matching slipper was found, the fact that it was found in such a remote place, or the fact that there really was a woman who could wear such a tiny slipper.

19. The word used by Duan Chengshi for "form" is *se,* literally meaning "color," but with strong connotations of "sex." The same graph was also used to translate Sanskrit *rūpa* (form).

20. Duan Chengshi seems almost studiously to avoid comparing Yexian to a *tiannü* (heavenly woman), which would have evoked all sorts of Buddhist images (e.g., Skt. *devakanyā, devi,* or *apsaras*), referring to her instead by the more neutral *tianren* (heavenly person).

21. This would appear to be a confused allusion to death by stoning, a custom common among neither the Chinese nor their southern neighbors, but well known in the Middle East (e.g., in the Bible: "He that is without sin, let him first cast a stone"; Islam: the stoning of the devil on the Hajj). In terms of cultural ecology, this would make sense because much of the Middle East is arid, rocky land with lots of good ammunition lying around everywhere.

22. The text merely says "seek/request female," but the word "matchmaker" in the previous clause requires that "female" be understood as "wife," not "daughter" or "woman."

23. I.e., Duan Chengshi's.

24. The text reads *jiaren* (literally, "family person; member of one's family"); the author is probably referring to a family servant.

25. Modern Nanning in the province of Guangxi, a southeastern province that is the home of China's largest "minority," the Zhuang, who speak a language closely related to Thai. It is presumed that the area around Nanning was already occupied by Tai speakers during the ninth century, when Duan Chengshi wrote this story down.

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